Confidence, social linkage, power, inequalities and fear in a world in rapid transformation – a Brazil-China dialogue

Tom Dwyer

Department of Sociology, University of Campinas (Unicamp), São Paulo, Brazil

Coordinator of the Study Group on Brazil-China Relations, Unicamp

Abstract

The forces of economic globalization have brought a number of surprising changes for Brazil’s role in the world, among these China has become Brazil’s major trading partner. This has made it necessary to get to know each other better, in order to deepen the grounds for cooperation on the one hand and to avoid that unsolvable differences lead to a ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington) on the other hand.

Some of the historical forces of economic surrounding economic development in both countries are placed in context especially with reference to the theorizations of Sun Liping.

Most of this paper is based on reflection that are drawn from two pieces of yet unpublished research: 1) A 2012 survey which examined values, horizons and lifestyles of young Chinese and Brazilian undergraduate students in six universities in each country; 2) a compendium on the sociology of youth in the BRICS countries.

The survey data revealed that the family is the most trusted institution in both countries. However, the literature teaches us that in spite of apparent similarities (DaMata) the family fulfills quite different roles in the West and in China (Fei Xiaotong). The operation of the political system is surrounded by a certain degree of skepticism in both countries, yet far higher levels of political participation are found in China than in Brazil, and far less confidence in political institutions exists in Brazil than in China. Transparency International rates both countries as equally corrupt and the literature suggests that corruption undermines confidence in the institutions. While definitions of corruption are difficult to apply in a cross-cultural context, there seems to be agreement that overly-close relations between the State and certain sectors of the market produce particular types of elites and high inequalities in both countries (Lazzarini, McGregor, Yasheng Huang). Our survey data shows that inequalities are condemned more severely by Chinese than by Brazilian students, and that corruption is seen as a greater problem among Brazilian students. The literature suggests that youth has an important role to paly in relation to political stability, and in particular that educated youth, when faced with adversity, may not remain quiet for long. Since the beginning of the 1990s the rise of a knowledge (or post-industrial) society has been associated with the rapid expansion of the higher education systems in both countries. While expansion of opportunities has accompanied strong economic growth over recent years – our survey data showed unexpected similarities between Chinese and Brazilian university students – they show common fears for the future and in particular in their capacity to find a fulfilling role in the labor market. These findings suggest that there is a need for policy-related dialogue between our leaders around globalization, post-industrialization, markets and the future of the younger generations.